



Self-harm and suicide coverage in Sri Lankan newspapers

An analysis of the compliance with recommended guidelines

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Title: Self-harm and suicide coverage in Sri Lankan newspapers – an analysis of the compliance with recommended guidelines

Abstract

Background: Irresponsible media reporting may influence suicidal behaviour. Adherence to guidelines for responsible reporting of suicide has not been examined in Sri Lanka in recent times.

Aims: To examine the quality of reporting on self-harm and suicide in Sri Lankan newspapers and compare the quality between Sinhala and English newspapers.

Method: From 01-Dec-14 to 31-Jan-2015, 407 editions of newspapers were screened. Reporting quality was measured using the PRINTQUAL tool.

Results: We identified 68 articles covering an episode of self-harm or suicide (42 Sinhala and 26 English). The majority of articles were non-compliant with guidelines for sensitive reporting. Indicators of non-compliance included that newspaper articles frequently reported method in the headline (53%), detailed characteristics of the individual (100%), used insensitive language (58% of English articles) and attributed a single factor cause to the self-harm (52%). No information about help-seeking was included.

Limitations: A relatively short period of data collection. Including social media, Tamil language newspapers and online publications would have provided additional understanding of reporting practises.

Conclusion: The majority of Sri Lankan newspapers did not follow principals of good reporting, indicating a need for further training of journalists.

Key words

Suicide, self-harm, suicide reporting, media guidelines, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

A number of studies have shown a relationship between practices in media reporting on suicide and subsequent suicidal behaviour in vulnerable individuals (Pirkis, Mok, Robinson, & Nordentoft, 2016). There is evidence that reporting can introduce or spread new means of suicide (Chen, Chen, Gunnell, & Yip, 2013) and lead to the so-called Werther effect, where readers imitate the suicides portrayed in the media (Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, & Skehan, 2006). However, responsible coverage of suicide can have a preventive effect, help de-stigmatize and educate as well as encourage help-seeking – in addition to ensuring decency and respect for the bereaved (World Health Organization, 2008; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Bohanna & Wang, 2012).

Several guidelines for responsible reporting on suicide have been developed by governments, non-governmental organizations and media entities at national and global levels, in particular the World Health Organization (WHO) (Pirkis et al., 2006). In 2000, the WHO produced a set of media guidelines encouraging sensitive reporting of suicide (World Health Organization, 2000) that was updated in 2008 (World Health Organization, 2008). More recently recommendations for the media formed part of the WHO guidelines for the development of national suicide prevention strategies (World Health Organization, 2014). The majority of media guidelines for responsible reporting of suicide are similar in their approach and include advice on avoiding sensationalism and explicit descriptions of method and site associated with the suicide; undue repetition of stories about suicide; and recommendations to include information about where to seek help.

Over 800,000 people die by suicide annually (World Health Organization, 2014). Low-and middle-income countries bear the highest burden and almost 40% of all global suicides occur in such countries in East and South East Asia (World Health Organization, 2014). Sri Lanka – where this study was conducted - recorded one of the highest suicide rates worldwide in 1995 with 51.5/100,000 population (Knipe, Metcalfe, & Gunnell, 2015). This has since decreased to an estimated 14/100,000 population in 2015 (Knipe, Chang, et al., 2017). In addition a considerable number of

individuals still self-harm - it was recently estimated that 339/100,000 population self-harmed in the Anuradhapura area of Sri Lanka (Knipe, Gunnell, et al., 2017).

In Sri Lanka, a few resources guiding the media in their reporting of suicides exist. The Centre for Policy Alternatives, Sri Lanka, and PressWise Trust, UK, developed the Suicide Sensitive Journalism Handbook in 2003. This handbook included an analysis of 84 printed newspaper articles reporting on suicide as well as recommendations for responsible reporting for Sri Lankan media professionals (Deshapriya, Hattotuwa, & Jempson, 2003). The Editor's Guild of Sri Lanka includes one recommendation for reporting on suicide; to avoid presenting excessive details of methods used (The Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka, 2014). To our knowledge, no peer-reviewed analysis has been conducted on the quality of reporting on suicide in Sri Lanka.

This study aims to examine the quality of reporting on episodes of self-harm and suicide in Sri Lankan newspapers. More specifically, objectives were to:

- 1) Assess how reporting on self-harm and suicide in Sri Lankan newspapers comply with suicide reporting guidelines utilizing the PRINTQUAL tool.
- 2) Compare the quality of reporting on self-harm and suicide between Sinhala and English newspapers.

Method

Search strategy

A media analysis was carried out over a two-month period from 1 December 2014 to 31 January 2015. Seven national printed newspapers were searched, chosen due to their popularity and wide circulation: three out of seven available Sinhala newspapers (Lankadeepa, Divaina and Ada) and four out of four available English newspapers (Daily News, Daily Mirror, The Island and Ceylon Today). All newspapers had daily editions, except for Ada that was sold five days of the week.

All newspaper articles were hand searched for reports on self-harm and suicide. MW and MR screened the Sinhala newspapers while MWA screened the English newspapers for articles. All Sinhala articles were translated from Sinhala to English

by CR, a graduate student in English literature and fluent in both Sinhala and English. Following translation, JBS screened all articles in accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Newspaper articles were included when they reported on a specific case of self-harm or suicide and excluded when they did *not* report on a specific case of self-harm or suicide. Excluded articles comprised reports on suicide bombing or reports where neither ‘suicide’ nor ‘self-harm’ was mentioned. Additionally, reports of deceased under the age of ten were excluded due to the difficulties in assessing intent in line with most official suicide statistics. For an overview of the newspaper article selection process, refer to figure 1. Each included Sinhala article was independently rated by both CR and JBS, utilizing the PRINTQUAL tool. English articles were independently rated by JBS. FK rated ten of the English articles to ensure agreement of the coding.

Quality assessment

International studies have found that while strategies in the form of guidelines on suicide reporting are effective, implementation is still lacking in many national contexts (Pirkis et al., 2006). The PRINTQUAL tool was developed to create a common reference system for measuring the quality of suicide reporting and compliance to guidelines (John et al., 2014). It comprises two scales of poor and good reporting on suicides (19 poor-quality and four good-quality items) as well as a weighted scoring system to measure the perceived degree of negative or positive impact each item has on the general population (see Table 1). Following the example of John et al in their study of cluster suicides in the UK, we in this study only measured the frequency of non-weighted items (John et al., 2017). The weighting for each item is however still reflected in Table 1.

Considering the high number of individuals who self-harm in Sri Lanka, we included articles that covered such episodes. Though the PRINTQUAL tool is developed for the reporting of suicide (John et al., 2014), we assessed that the tool was also relevant to use for reporting on episodes of self-harm. In this report it should be noted that we use the term ‘self-harm’ and not ‘suicide attempt’ to reflect the context of suicide in Sri Lanka as it does not necessarily entail an intent to die (Eddleston, Sheriff, & Hawton, 1998).

The PRINTQUAL tool includes ‘recommended phrases to be used or avoided’ in item number 6 and 20. For the English newspaper articles we used the list of suggestions from the Suicide Sensitive Journalism Handbook (Deshapriya et al., 2003) that are in line with other guidelines, i.e. the Samaritans’ guidelines also used by the PRINTQUAL authors (Samaritans, 2008; John et al., 2014). No such list of appropriate Sinhala wording was available. Though translation for this study was thoroughly carried out, we were concerned that it might not have fully captured how specific words and phrases contain different meanings in the Sinhala and English languages. We therefore decided not to include a rating of the appropriateness of wording for the Sinhala newspaper articles.

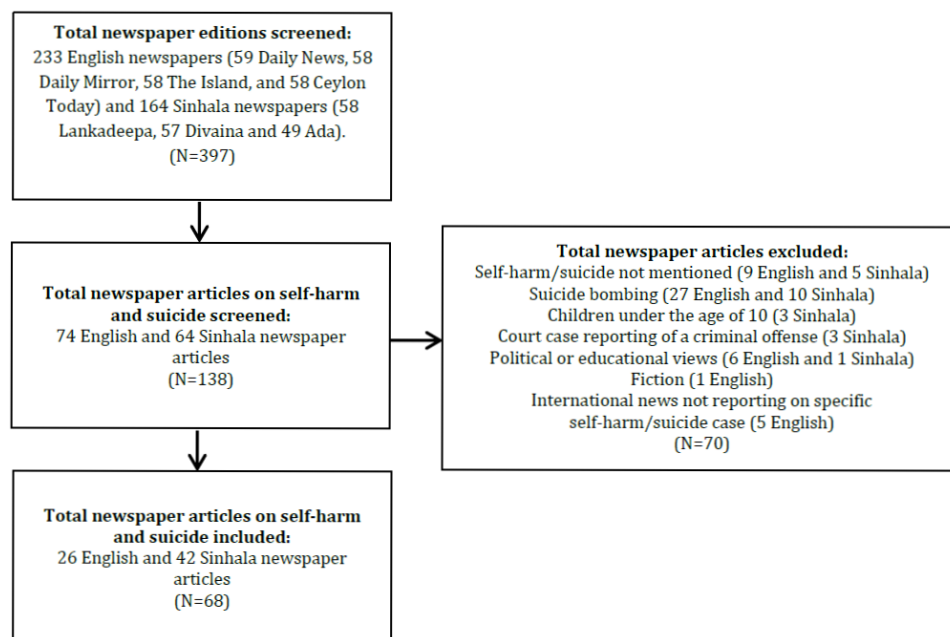
For all articles we recorded if the articles reported on a case of self-harm or suicide; the themes explained to cause the self-harm/suicide; and the reporting of personal characteristics (gender, name, place of residence and occupation). Drawings of the deceased and means were a feature in the articles and we therefore also recorded that.

Results

Screening and selection of newspaper articles

The selection process is reflected in figure 1. In total, 397 editions of seven newspapers were screened; 164 Sinhala and 233 English. Screening revealed 138 articles of which 70 were excluded, due to them not reporting on a specific case of self-harm or suicide. In total, 68 articles were included in the study - 26 were English language and 42 were Sinhala language articles.

Figure 1. Newspaper article selection process



Newspaper and reporting characteristics

One newspaper publication had not published any articles on self-harm or suicide within the set time frame. The majority of the included articles were found in the Sinhala newspapers Divaina (27) and Lankadeepa (15) and in the English newspaper Ceylon Today (16) – all privately owned, independent newspapers (Press Reference, 2017).

Of the 68 newspaper articles, 53 reported on a specific case of self-harm or suicide. In the remaining 15 newspaper articles the words *self-harm* or *suicide* were mentioned as *possible* explanations of an episode that could also be found to be an accident or homicide. Of all 68 newspaper articles, 79 % were reports of suicides. In three of the Sinhala language newspaper articles (7%) more than one episode of self-harm and suicide were mentioned. Five of the English language newspaper articles (19%) reported on suicides outside of Sri Lanka.

The most common format of newspaper reporting was brief police reports, with 79% of Sinhala (n= 33) and 58% of English (n= 15) newspaper articles using this presentation. These reports only briefly explained the episode of self-harm or suicide.

More in-depth coverage of the events was provided in 25% (n=17) of articles. Of these, seven included hypothetical emotional states and conversations leading up to the case of self-harm or suicide.

Reporting quality

Table 1 shows the frequency of the PRINTQUAL poor-quality and good-quality items for each category of articles included. The poor-quality items rated per newspaper article ranged from zero to eight out of the 19 possible items. Of the 68 newspaper articles, 4% had no poor-quality scorings. The range of good-quality items per newspaper article ranged from zero to one out of the four possible items. A total of 85% of newspaper articles had no good-quality scorings.

Table 1. PRINTQUAL: Frequency of each item in total and for Sinhala and English articles

	Weighting	Frequency present (%), All, n=68	Sinhala articles on suicide/self-harm (%), n=42	English articles on suicide/self-harm (%), n=26
<i>Poor-quality items</i>				
Is the article on the front page?	60	8 (11.8)	4 (9.5)	4 (15.4)
Is the main headline on the front page?	78	0	0	0
Is the method mentioned in the headline?	48	36 (52.9)	26 (61.9)	10 (38.5)
Does the article cover over 50% of the page?	43	7 (10.3)	5 (11.9)	2 (7.7)
Is it on page 3?	24	14 (20.6)	13 (31.0)	1 (3.8)
Does the article use phrases to be avoided as stated guidelines?	23	15 (57.7)	-	15 (57.7)
Are explicit or technical details of the method described?	70	5 (7.4)	2 (4.8)	3 (11.5)
Are technical details of an unusual method for the locality described?	69	4 (5.9)	1 (2.4)	3 (11.5)
Are the contents of a suicide note described?	31	1 (1.5)	0	1 (3.8)
Does it mention or refer to a suicide hotspot?	54	0	0	0
Does it report positive outcomes from the death?	46	2 (2.9)	0	2 (7.7)
Is the cause of the suicide attributed to a single factor?	33	35 (51.5)	22 (52.4)	13 (50.0)
Is there repeated reporting of earlier suicides in the article?	45	2 (2.9)	1 (2.4)	1 (3.8)
Does the article report whether the person knew previous suicides or that the timing implies a link?	42	3 (4.4)	2 (4.8)	1 (3.8)
Does the article highlight community expressions of grief?	38	7 (10.3)	3 (7.1)	4 (15.4)
Does the article include interviews with the bereaved?	30	15 (22.1)	12 (28.6)	3 (11.5)
Does the article include photographs of the scene, location or method?	54	4 (5.9)	3 (7.1)	1 (3.8)
Does the article include a photograph of the deceased?	36	14 (20.6)	10 (23.8)	4 (15.4)
Does the article mention a celebrity suicide?	66	0	0	0
<i>Good-quality items</i>				
Does the article include recommended language as based on guidelines?	34	1 (3.8)	-	1 (3.8)
Does the article describe complex or multifactorial causes of death?	35	1 (1.5)	0	1 (3.8)
Does it include sources of information or advise?	58	0	0	0
Does it take the opportunity to educate the reader?	48	0	0	0

The method of self-harm and suicide was mentioned in the headline in 53% of newspaper articles and technical details of the method were provided in 7%. Table 2

provides an overview of the methods used in the headline or text of reported cases of self-harm and suicide as well as the frequency of reporting. In seven newspaper articles, several methods were described. Of all 68 articles, 6% described an unusual method for the area, which included cutting one's throat with a knife and swallowing a number of substances and materials like hair clips and ashes mixed with soap water. In Table 3 the frequency of personal characteristics reported in the newspaper articles is highlighted. Notably, Sinhala language newspaper articles more frequently included personal information than English language newspaper articles.

Table 2. Method of self-harm or suicide portrayed in articles

	All,	Sinhala articles on suicide/self-harm	English articles on suicide/self-harm
Hanging	23	15	8
Drowning	8	5	3
Self-immolation	8	4	4
Pesticide poisoning	5	4	1
Jumping into a well	7	6	1
Jumping from a height	6	5	1
Knife wounds	6	4	2
Firearms	3	0	3
Medicine	3	2	1
Jumping in front of a train	1	1	0
Unusual events	4	1	3

Table 3. Personal characteristics of individuals portrayed in articles

	Frequency present (%), All, n=68	Sinhala articles on suicide/self-harm, n=42	English articles on suicide/self-harm, n=26
Gender mentioned	68 (100.0)	42 (100.0)	26 (100.0)
Age mentioned	52 (76.5)	34 (81.0)	18 (69.2)
Location	54 (79.4)	34 (81.0)	20 (76.9)
Name mentioned	51 (75.0)	35 (83.3)	16 (61.5)
Occupation	31 (45.6)	21 (50.0)	10 (38.5)

Of all the 68 newspaper articles, 21% (n=14) were printed on page 3, which is considered prominent placement. Further, 12% of articles (n=8) were on the front page, however the headline was never the main headline on the front page.

A photograph of the deceased or the location of the episode was included in 26% (n=18) of the 68 newspaper articles; the deceased was pictured in 21% (n=14) of newspaper articles – primarily in the Sinhala articles. The English articles frequently used drawings of the deceased and/or method used – this was the case in 42% of English newspaper articles (n=11). In 58% (n=15) of the English newspaper articles

phrases were used that should be avoided when reporting on suicide. Phrases recommended when describing suicide were used in one English newspaper article.

No newspaper articles included information about where to seek help or educated the reader about suicide. In 22% (n=15) of the 68 articles an interview with a bereaved was included – the large majority of which were in Sinhala language articles. The underlying causes of self-harm or suicide was attributed to a single factor in 52% of all the 68 articles; only one English language newspaper article described a multifactorial cause of death. Where a motive was reported, the main explanations were a family fight, a failed love affair, financial difficulties and/or diseases.

Discussion

This study reveals that the majority of Sri Lankan printed newspaper articles reporting suicides and self-harm in a two-month period in 2014-15 were non-compliant with guidelines for sensitive reporting. Recommendations especially likely to be violated comprised: reporting of detailed information about the individual and method used and lack of information about help-seeking or the complexities of suicide. Conversely, recommendations likely to be followed included: not publishing an article about self-harm or suicide on the front page; or mentioning a suicide hotspot or earlier suicides. Though the Sinhala and English articles scored differently on selected items in the PRINTQUAL tool, they were equally non-compliant with guidelines.

Visual and written reporting of personal characteristics and methods

Suicide reporting is known to be explicit in some Asian countries (Beautrais et al., 2008). We found frequent presentation of personal characteristics and methods involved in cases of self-harm or suicide. This is concerning and might provide vulnerable individuals with models to imitate. In 26% of newspaper articles a photograph of the deceased or the location was shown – primarily in Sinhala language articles. In comparison, a study carried out in India found that 19% of 341 newspaper articles included photographs (Chandra, Doraiswamy, Padmanabh, & Philip, 2014) whereas a Chinese study found much higher use of photographs (58% of 2,279 articles) (Fu, Chan, & Yip, 2011). Though English newspapers more commonly made use of drawings instead of photographs, they were still explicit and clearly illustrated the method used in the episode of self-harm or suicide.

Including the method of suicide in the headline is discouraged to avoid promoting and perpetuating methods of suicide (Samaritans, 2008), but this was done in 53% of the articles in this study – especially those in Sinhala language – a proportion that is higher than in the study from India (23%) (Chandra et al., 2014), but considerably lower than what was found in the study from China (81%) (Fu et al., 2011).

Furthermore, 7% of all articles included technical details of the method. This is in contrast to the study from India where 19% of articles gave step-by-step guides to the method used (Chandra et al., 2014) as well as the study on Sri Lankan media coverage explained in the Suicide Sensitive Journalism Handbook from 2003, where all 84 articles clearly specified in-depth details of the methods used (Deshapriya et al., 2003).

Ingestion of pesticides and hanging are the most common methods of suicide in Sri Lanka (Knipe et al., 2014), but while hanging was the mean most frequently mentioned in the included newspaper articles, pesticide ingestion rarely featured. Others have noted over-reporting of suicides involving more dramatic methods (Pirkis, Burgess, Blood, & Francis, 2007) and it can be argued that hanging is visually quite dramatic. Though pesticide ingestion might also appear dramatic, the pervasive use of it in the Sri Lankan context might have normalized its occurrence.

Language use

It was decided to exclude the PRINTQUAL items pertaining to appropriate language use for the Sinhala newspaper articles included in this study, concerned that the translation could not fully capture the necessary nuances. However, the English newspaper articles included in this study did use phrases that should be avoided (58%). Especially the term ‘to commit suicide’ was frequently used. Only one English article included recommended language as based on guidelines (Deshapriya et al., 2003; Samaritans, 2008).

Sources of help and information about suicide

A common recommendation of guidelines is to provide information about options for help-seeking at the end of an article covering suicide (World Health Organization, 2008). This was not included in any of the articles in the current study, which is

similar to the study carried out in Bangalore, India, where only 1% of articles included information about help-seeking (Chandra et al., 2014). Though the level of basic mental health support services is limited in Sri Lanka, especially in rural areas, a number of non-governmental driven suicide hotlines do exist – for example Sumithrayo (Sri Lanka Sumithrayo, 2013) and CCCLine (CCC Foundation, 2009). Sri Lankan newspapers could play an important role in creating awareness about the existence of these services and other relevant institutions offering help to suicidal individuals.

Guidelines further recommend that newspaper outlets educate the reader about the complexities of self-harm and suicide (World Health Organization, 2008) – an item which was included in only one article. In contrast, articles typically reported mono-causality behind the self-harm or suicide (52%). Self-harm in Sri Lanka has been described as a sudden, impulsive action (Pearson et al., 2014), which also explains why no suicide note was mentioned in any of the newspaper articles. At the same time, it has also been found that Sri Lankan individuals who previously self-harmed explained a range of seemingly unresolvable daily life stressors, appearing as accumulating, deeper causes of the self-harm (Soerensen et al, 2017). Sri Lankan newspaper outlets could play a role in dispelling myths and highlighting the series of events and personal circumstances behind suicide and self-harm, while minding the privacy of the deceased and bereaved.

Policy considerations

Guidelines for sensitive reporting of suicide do exist in Sri Lanka (Deshapriya et al., 2003), however they could be refined, for instance by including a list of appropriate Sinhala and Tamil phrases to use for sensitive reporting. Further training of Sri Lankan media professionals would be relevant, minding the specific gaps for Sinhala and English language newspaper reporting. The Suicide Sensitive Journalism Handbook from 2003 do report of a training of trainers activity (Deshapriya et al., 2003), but whether this routinely occurs has not been possible to obtain. Media professionals should be closely involved in a process of refining guidelines and training of journalists, since adherence has been found to be closely linked with the degree of involvement and ownership (Bohanna & Wang, 2012). Additionally, schools of journalism should further emphasize responsible media reporting on

suicide. Qualitative research examining awareness, use and perception of the guidelines by Sri Lankan media professionals would also be useful (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Cheng, Fu, Caine, & Yip, 2014).

Strengths and limitations

The study has several limitations including the brief monitoring period that resulted in a relatively low number of articles for further analysis. Furthermore, the months selected to carry out the media analysis were leading up to the presidential election – an event which was notably covered, leaving less room for other types of news. The item of whether a celebrity suicide was reported was not relevant for this time period. Hence, under other circumstances there might have been more and other types of articles on self-harm and suicide. It is, however, the authors' opinion that the period of analysis still provides a relevant data set to shed light on compliance to guidelines in print newspapers in Sri Lanka.

The PRINTQUAL tool was developed in a Western setting and has to the best of our knowledge never been used in a middle-income country. In general, we found it to be appropriate to the Sri Lankan context, although we did measure additional items not captured in PRINTQUAL. The item pertaining to a suicide note was not relevant for the articles included in this study. There is no consensus of language use in Sinhala and so it was not possible to include the items pertaining to appropriate language use on the Sinhala newspaper articles. PRINTQUAL was developed to measure the quality of suicide reporting, however, we found it to also be a useful instrument to capture cases of non-fatal self-harm.

A more comprehensive explanation of suicide might have been present in articles excluded from this study. We only included articles from printed newspapers; however more Sri Lankan news outlets are shifting from print to digital publications. Further, only English and Sinhala language newspapers were included – the languages of the majority of the population. Including Tamil newspaper articles in the search strategy would likely have provided an additional understanding of the portrayal of self-harm and suicide in Sri Lanka. Future research could also benefit from an online analysis; social media is extremely popular in Sri Lanka and how suicide is portrayed on for example Facebook would be relevant to explore. Though

regulation of traditional media outlets are losing ground to new online alternatives, social media can be inspired by already existing quality assessment tools, such as PRINTQUAL.

Conclusion

This analysis of self-harm and suicide reporting practises found that Sri Lankan newspapers might expose vulnerable readers to harmful influences. Dialogue with and training of Sri Lankan media professionals would be relevant to improve the portrayal of self-harm and suicide in Sri Lankan printed newspapers. We furthermore call for more research on reporting practises in other media outlets.

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